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PP RUEHDBU RUEHLN RUEHPOD RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHMO #0389 0490608
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 180608Z FEB 09
FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1983
INFO RUEHDX/MOSCOW POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS MOSCOW 000389

DEPARTMENT FOR PRM/ECA

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: IRC Chief Says Working in Chechnya Getting Easier

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The International Rescue Committee (IRC)'s Russia Country Director spoke with Moscow diplomats February 11 about his work in the North Caucasus, some of it funded by State/PRM, and about the difficulty of functioning amid instability and corruption.

Despite the obstacles, IRC's ability to operate in Chechnya has improved, while competing political forces in Dagestan present a challenge. Humanitarian NGOs working in the region accept that violence is an operational hazard. IRC has begun to contemplate its exit from the region with an eye to sustainability. End Summary. Roundtable Gathers Embassies and NGO Implementer

¶2. (U) Representatives of ECHO and of the French, Dutch, Danish, and Swedish Embassies met at Refcoord's invitation February 11 to hear from Thomas Hill, IRC's Grozny-based country director who was in Moscow for consultations with donors. Hill, an American citizen and former Peace Corps volunteer, has worked in Russia for six years, the last year and a half for IRC in the North Caucasus. In 2008 IRC moved its headquarters from Nazran, Ingushetia, to Grozny, Chechnya. In part this is because the organization is presently seeking to focus its efforts on Chechnya and Dagestan, Hill explained. But trends in communal violence are such that he also now feels safer in Chechnya than in Ingushetia. While he acknowledged that security at IRC's group home in Grozny is imperfect, Hill quipped that he sleeps comfortably there, whereas to spend the night in Nazran he would want no less than a fortress.

¶3. (U) IRC is one of three FY09 PRM NGO partners operating in Russia. Active in 42 countries worldwide, it focuses in the North Caucasus on livelihood projects; water and sanitation; large-scale economic projects, such as the development of partnerships between agricultural cooperatives and small businesses; and grassroots empowerment through community mobilization. Hill believes that of these, the last is the most important because it will produce the greatest long-term results. This is particularly pertinent because the GOR will likely ask foreign NGOs to leave the region as the 2014 Sochi Olympics approach, Hill predicted. Operating in the North Caucasus No Cakewalk

¶4. (SBU) The Ingush republican government created numerous problems for Hill, who last year successfully took the local Federal Migration Service to court after it attempted to deport an IRC contract employee. The combination of government-sponsored violence, criminal violence, and rebel violence, along with ethnic animosities, creates a chaotic situation. Violence will continue to hinder the efforts of human rights activists. Referring to Ingushetia.ru editor Magomed Yevloyev's August 2008 murder, Hill said that it was "horrible, but expected. . .it is a part of the work we are doing."

¶5. (SBU) Hill finds operating in Chechnya much easier than in Ingushetia, although IRC must pay the republican government for required extra security. After a prolonged period in late 2007 and early 2008 of denials of access to expatriate staff, Chechnya now grants entry relatively readily. Hill assiduously cultivates contacts in all agencies and levels of the government, having discovered that even ministries tasked with coordinating liaison jealously guard his reports to them. Having "nothing to hide" in IRC's activities, Hill even meets regularly with the FSB. He made a point of inviting that agency's officials to inspect IRC's new Grozny headquarters "to evaluate security" before the organization

moved in.

¶6. (SBU) The situation in Dagestan is different from that in Chechnya and Ingushetia, according to Hill. He described the republic as being like the American Wild West: "everyone carries a gun and would kill you for your bicycle." Hill believes the instability there is tied more to criminality than politics - radical Islam is a comparatively minor factor in Dagestan. The republican government is wary of outside contacts, but the local government is receptive to proposed IRC assistance. Hill shared a story of IRC offering to help the Khasavyurt government recover from a locust infestation in summer 2008. While local officials, who grimly displayed formaldehyde-preserved locusts in their offices, welcomed the offer, republican officials refused to sign off. There were no locusts in Dagestan, insisted the administration in Makhachkala.

¶7. (SBU) Though IRC will continue to apply for grants to fund North Caucasus programs for another year or two, Hill said he is already advising his U.S. headquarters on an exit strategy. He hopes to leave behind a for-profit business, which he believes is more sustainable than a spun-off domestic NGO. Ideally, a successful business or businesses would eventually use their profits for civil society and local development. Hill reiterated the importance of empowering communities by giving them the tools they need to solve their own problems, instead of solely giving aid.

Comment

¶8. (SBU) The assembled diplomats mostly represented donors who have already or will soon pull out of the North Caucasus. Under the circumstances, Hill's emphasis on teaching communities to do for themselves seems essential to beneficiaries' survival.

BEYRLE